Safety Cultures: *A Prioritization of Values*

By Jay Johnston

The greatest challenge in any work environment is to create a culture where self-esteem is tied to the safety process. For example, getting a plant manager to buy into the responsibilities of their job description to a point where they internalize the obligation and place value upon it.

Easier said than done.

The heart of the challenge lies with getting employees to "own" the concept and then take action. The internalization of specific values must naturally compete with many issues of distraction. Workplace competition, production goals, supply issues, the weather, pay scale, benefits and the like qualify as distractions when they interfere with core safety values.

Webster's defines the word *Value* using words like; *merit, usefulness, appreciation, excellence, benefit, appraise, esteem, importance, and worthiness*. All these Synonyms represent forms of validation essential to facilitate actionable alternatives. Of course, the Antonyms to the word Value include; *valuelessness, uselessness and cheapness*.

For conversation's sake, let's examine the Antonyms to the word *Value.* It would be hard for an employee to embrace core values of a company when they feel worthless, useless and cheap. We know this from studying the purpose of affirmative action in our society. The government is trying to level the playing field to set the stage for human validation and productive self-esteem. It is not the impact of such programs that we should learn from, it's the degradation and lack of confidence that flourishes when no effort is made at all.

The 1960's civil rights activist chant "I am somebody" is actually a home remedy kit for self- validation. Leadership understood the role lack of self-esteem plays in hindering healthy choices and discouraging personal growth. Application of this understanding within the work environment can be the first step towards the prioritization of values.

On a higher plane, the traffic is usually light. The air is clear, the view is spectacular and issues of intellectualization flow freely. However, most of us live in the real world where values are taken out and shot every day.

An old friend of mine once said, "The most important thing a man can do for his children is to love their mother". Now there's a value with substance. And yet acts of infidelity threaten the institution of marriage everyday. Sidestepping the moral issues for a moment, we know that lack of self-esteem and a feeling of uselessness are key rationalizations used when discarding core character values.

I believe that those same rationalizations interfere with the internalization and prioritization of the safety process in the work place.

Let's extend our understanding to embrace this possibility.

If my beliefs are correct, we must undertake challenge to assess each individual working environment in an attempt to uncover what distractions are hindering the internalization of our priorities. This is no lightweight task. One only has to look at the struggle and turmoil that has followed the affirmative action movement to see that it would seem "safer" not to know. Well, maybe not safer, maybe it seems more convenient. But those are valid rationalizations as we consider changing the world to make it a better place.

The bottom line in every situation usually ends up to be a question of values.

How do we instill core values in the face of all these distractions?

It starts with empathy.   One of my favorite movies of all time is Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life". Unfortunately commercialism and cynicism have beaten this simple message into a sugar coated fantasy tale that would put the most empathetic among us into a diabetic comma. When George Bailey stands up to Mr. Potter he is fighting for his beliefs. He is fighting for the values of others. He is fighting for his dignity. Clearly tested by distractions, George comes to visualize the value he brings to this world.

I used to say everyone should have to watch that movie to be officially declared a human being.   Now I simply wish for universal understanding of the message on value that it brings.

The most important thing a corporation can do to improve their safety culture is to care about their employees.

You show me an environment where the worker is highly valued and I'll show you a culture where safety is a high priority. With self worth comes understanding and the ability to internalize corporate values. When safety is a corporate value, it paves the way for the establishment of management control systems that cause implementation to occur.

Jay Johnston (www.TheSafetyLeader.com) is an aggressive insurance consultant, leading safety coach, enthusiastic speaker and nationally recognized safety writer, who designs and implements cutting edge risk management programs for businesses that want to prevent costly "insurance" surprises. You can contact him at (952) 253-2710 or Jay@TheSafetyLeader.com.